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Indonesia/East Timor: Serious ill-treatment by the army signals broken promises

News that a group of East Timorese have been severely ill-treated in detention by army personnel in East Timor confirms fears that Indonesia's new government is breaking its promise to improve the country's human rights situation, Amnesty International said today.

The detainees, who were arrested on suspicion of links to the armed resistance in East Timor, were beaten with rifle butts, kicked, and subjected to death threats. One man was reportedly hit with a rifle in his face and chest until he bled from his mouth and nose. Another received a head wound after being beaten with a rifle. Yet another was burnt with a cigarette butt.

"The appalling abuses suffered by these 11 people at the hands of the Indonesian army have confirmed our fears that President Habibie has a long way to go in improving the human rights situation, both in East Timor and Indonesia," Amnesty International said.

In a new report the organization acknowledges some steps made by the new government, including releasing 120 political prisoners, allowing independent trade unions, ratifying the United Nations Convention against Torture in October and giving a UN human rights officer a base in Jakarta, as well as access to East Timor.

"Yet on the ground progress is slow. There are still dozens of political prisoners and people facing charges of 'rebellion' for peaceful protests. There is no progress in finding who really killed the four Trisakti university students in May, establishing the truth about the May anti-Chinese riots or in locating 13 activists abducted by the army earlier this year," Amnesty International said. "In Aceh, the army has not accounted for all those arrested between January and May this year."

Police and soldiers have acted with restraint during many of the riots and demonstrations since President Suharto's fall in May 1998 but there are spectacular over-reactions, particularly when soldiers are injured. This month, six people died from gunshot wounds and dozens were badly beaten during the special meeting of the Indonesian Parliament. In July at least three people died after troops opened fire on sleeping people at a long-running pro-independence demonstration on Biak island, off Irian Jaya.

"The Habibie government must live up to its promises to respect human rights, ensure greater transparency and accountability, increased political participation, and an end to impunity, " Amnesty International said.

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